

WILLIAM JAMES' MORALS AND JULIEN BENDA'S

It is Not Pragmatism That is Opportunist

JOHN DEWEY

IN HIS article, "The Attack on Western Morality" (COMMENTARY, November 1947), M. Julien Benda chose to include what he regards as pragmatic philosophy as a leading figure in that attack. In fact, he assigns to it, along with and by the side of Russian Bolshevik philosophy, a place in the very front rank of the intellectual forces engaged in undermining the morality of the Western world. This is a serious charge; none the less serious because those who call themselves pragmatists will be highly surprised to learn that the philosophy they profess has had any such extensive influence either for good or evil. One's first impression is that M. Benda is using the term "pragmatic" loosely to stand for all movements that tend to put immediate and narrow expediency—in the sense of profit, whether financial, political, or personal—above all other considerations. Since "pragmatism" is a specific philosophical term having a definite meaning that has nothing in common with the usage just mentioned, this loose use

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would indicate also a loose sense of intellectual responsibility. But M. Benda cannot claim even this protection, slight as it is.

For after saying in his main sectional heading, "The Socratic Christian Morality was the Only One Honored a Few Years Ago," and giving to his next main section the caption "Deliberate Assaults Against this Morality at the End of the 19th Century—the Preaching of Pragmatic Morals," he proceeds to make a specific identification of these "pragmatic morals" with the doctrines of William James—who published, toward the "end of the 19th century," his book entitled *Pragmatism*.

Here is what M. Benda writes—and I quote it because it is the one and only textual reference by which he even suggests the evidence for the specific charge leveled against pragmatic philosophy: "Cecil Rhodes had already declared at the time of the Boer War: 'This war is just because it is useful to my country.' To be sure, he was only a business man; but an intellectual, Kipling, took a similar attitude. Dare I say that it was close, almost violently close, to that of William James at the time the island of Cuba was grabbed by his compatriots?"

The italics are inserted by me in order to make clear beyond doubt just what M. Benda intended by reference to pragmatic philosophy and morality. As authority for his statement about James, he expressly refers to "his *Letters*, II, pp. 73-74." What James *actually* said we shall soon see. By a curious coincidence, James refers in a later letter to Kipling's attitude to American seizure of the Philippines, and what he says on that point will also be quoted.

HERE is what James actually wrote in a letter to a French philosopher-friend,

François Pillon, on June 15, 1898. (The treaty of peace in which the "compatriots" of M. Benda's account grabbed the Philippines and Porto Rico—but *not* Cuba—was not signed until six months after the date of the letter to which M. Benda refers as his authority.) "We now have the Cuban War. A curious episode of history, showing how a nation's ideals can be changed in the twinkling of an eye, by a succession of outward events partly accidental." After referring to the "persuasion on the part of the people that the cruelty and misrule of Spain in Cuba call for her expulsion," and after mentioning the explosion of the Maine as the "partly accidental outward event" that suddenly changed the nation's ideals, he proceeds as follows: "The actual declaration of war by Congress, however, was a case of *psychologie des foules*, a genuine hysteric stampede at the last moment. . . . The European nations of the continent cannot believe that our pretense of humanity, and our disclaiming of all ideas of conquest is sincere. It has been *absolutely* sincere." The force of the "has been" in this sentence comes out clearly in a passage that follows: "But here comes in the psychological factor; once the excitement of action gets loosed . . . the old human instincts will get into play with all their old strength, and the ambition and sense of mastery which our nation has will set up new demands. It shall never take Cuba; I imagine that to be very certain. . . . But Porto Rico, and even the Philippines, are not so sure. We had supposed ourselves (with all our crudity and barbarity in certain ways) a better nation morally than the rest, safe at home, etc. . . . Dreams! Human Nature is everywhere the same; and at the least temptation all the old military passions rise and sweep everything before them."*

* James' psychological doctrines were notable for assigning an importance to subrational vital conditions which he called "instincts," a position that is now a psychological commonplace but was then a startling novelty. That he glorified these instincts simply is not true. He treated them as facts of such weight that any policy for human improvement which ignores them is doomed to failure. It is pertinent to the understanding of the passage just quoted to refer to his more extended statements in

I do not quote this passage in defense of William James; he does not need it. Nor do I quote it for a reason which would be wholly relevant in another context: namely, an exhibition of the realistic quality of his vision based on a degree of intellectual integrity and clarity that unfortunately is not ordinary. I quote the passage as Exhibit "A" with respect to the quality of M. Benda's intellectual responsibility. It may well be that James believed that the undeniable "cruelty and misrule" in Cuba, if not ended by the action of Spain itself, would in the end justify resort to war in order to free Cuba. That, however, is a speculative surmise. The *actual war*, as it took place, he attributes to what was, relatively, an external accident resulting in a manifestation of the "psychology of crowds," in which deep-seated instincts temporarily overthrew control by intelligence. A few years later, returning to the theme, he wrote: "I think that the manner in which the McKinley administration railroaded the country into its policy of conquest was abominable, and the way the country pucked [sic] up its ancient soul at the first touch of temptation, and followed, was sickening." (*Letters*, Vol. II, p. 289).

James was not an absolute pacifist; possibly M. Benda himself did not carry his absolutism to the point of finding evil in the fact that the United States joined in the last war. But in any case, all this is merely introductory to the matter of the irresponsibility of M. Benda's account of James' position—his account of "pragmatic morality" as a philosophy of cheap and base expediency.

FOR it is not merely that what James wrote was written six months before the treaty in which we grabbed the Philippines. It is

"Remarks at a Peace Banquet" (1904), and "The Moral Equivalent of War," both published in his *Memories and Studies*. They are too long to quote here; but the opening sentence of the "Moral Equivalent" essay is: "I devoutly believe in the reign of peace and in the gradual advent of some sort of a socialistic equilibrium." The essay then states the necessity for a social order in which there must be a discipline in subordinating egoism and personal advantage to large and generous ideals if a peaceful regime is not to become a soft pleasure-economy.

not merely that James was as right in his *prediction* that we would not take Cuba, as M. Benda is wrong in his report, fifty years later, that we *did* take it. These things are of minor importance, compared with the fact that William James was one of the first, one of the most indignant, and one of the most persistent of the Americans who protested against our seizure of the Philippines—an episode now happily terminated. Nor did William James wait till the seizure was legally completed. The very letter to which M. Benda refers in support of his statement about James, contains the following statement: "I am going to a great popular meeting in Boston today where a lot of my friends are to protest against the new 'imperialism.'" (James was the vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League.)

It is not for me to try to tell which horn of the dilemma M. Benda may prefer: either he had not read the letter, or he had read it and chose to suppress both it and the attempt to learn about the public and well-known record of James with reference to the war and to the taking of Philippines. It is enough that he transforms a "grab" of the Philippines which James opposed, into a grab of Cuba—which did not take place; he then makes this transformation the main—because the one and only—textual reference for what he goes on to make of pragmatic morality. Comment on M. Benda's moral standard of responsibility in intellectual matters does not seem to be needed beyond noting that this is an emphatic and more genuine instance of "the treason of the intellectuals" than any he himself has fumed against.

M. Benda's association of James with Kipling is a secondary matter. But it is possible to quote from the same volume of James' letters the facts on this point. In a letter written in February of the year following the letter just dealt with, we find this passage about Kipling: "I wish he would harken a bit more to his deeper human self and a bit less to his shallower jingo self. If the Anglo-Saxon race would drop its sniveling cant, it would have a good deal less of a 'burden' to carry." And then comes the passage with re-

spect to the Philippines: "Kipling knows perfectly well that our camps in the tropics are not college settlements or our armies bands of philanthropists slumming it; and I think it is a shame he should represent us to ourselves in that light."

I doubt if it is mere coincidence that it was only a few short months after his reflections on the outbreak of the primitive in Americans, as in other men, that James wrote: "As for me, my bed is made: I am against bigness and greatness in all forms, and with the invisible molecular forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water, and yet rending the hardest monuments of man's pride if you give them time. . . . So I am against all big organizations as such . . . all big successes . . . and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way."

This quotation from the man who is presented by M. Benda as teaching a gospel of immediate "practical" success suffices, I believe, to show how "violently" M. Benda "dares" in his account of the pragmatism of William James. It is a typical specimen of how far he "dares" in his whole account of pragmatism. Although I am far from claiming that all of us who are named pragmatists measure up to either the intellectual or the moral stature of William James, I definitely do claim that the passage just quoted from him comes as close to the spirit of pragmatism as M. Benda's account is remote from it.

THE culmination of what M. Benda "dares" is found in passages in which he affiliates pragmatism with the philosophy held and practiced by those in control of the Soviet Union. One of these passages is in the heading that reads: "Two Forms of Pragmatic Ethics Particularly Triumphant at Present," the second of the "two forms" being explicitly identified with the philosophy of Bolshevik Communism. This identity he "dares" to assert in the sentence reading "[prag-

matism] tends to recognize no moral values—justice, truth, reason—except as determined by practical considerations—or, more exactly, by economic interest”—i.e., in the case of the triumphant Bolshevik version. Were I to say that M. Benda's account of the latter philosophy is no more accurate than his version of pragmatic philosophy and leave the matter there, he might use that remark as evidence of an attempt to defend Russian official philosophy. So I will say that Macaulay's schoolboy might well be aware of the fact that no practical considerations of any sort, not even those of “economic interest,” are determining factors of Bolshevistic philosophy. On the contrary, it is as absolutistic as the philosophy with which M. Benda has allied himself, although the absolutism is that of “dialectical materialism” instead of what is presumably in the case of M. Benda a “spiritualist,” possibly supernatural, variety. In any case the conflict of the two philosophies with one another is that of rival absolutisms. It is curious to observe that the absolutistic state philosophy of Bolshevik Russia interprets American pragmatism in pretty much the same fashion as the absolutistic M. Benda.* Neither can “dare” to report pragmatism in its own terms as the systematic elaboration of the *logic and ethics of scientific inquiry*.

The ideological amalgam expressed in M. Benda's phrase, “Socratic-Christian,” is, to say the least, perplexing. Socrates was put to death on the ground that his questioning of accepted moral and civic doctrines was subversive. According to all accounts, the one thing for which he stood, the one thing that caused his death at the hands of established and recognized authorities, was that he placed the right and authority of continued systematic inquiry in the search for truth above all other authorities that claimed the right to regulate the course of life. M.

Benda presumably has reasons he does not disclose for substituting “Socratic-Christian” for the usual phrase, “Judeo-Christian.” But as long as these reasons are kept occult, one can only say that it looks a good deal like an attempt to eat the cake of supernatural absolutism and at the same time keep some of it under the pretense of questioning absolute claims. In any case, it is pertinent to state that, on the face of known facts, those who still assert the rights and authority of *critical* systematic examination of all *received* teachings and belief from any source—among whom pragmatists are numbered in the first rank—have the prior claim to the title “followers of Socrates.”

IF M. BENDA should decide to write a responsible account of pragmatic philosophy, including its bearings on morality (for the phrase “pragmatic morality” *taken by itself* is meaningless), the account might well take its point of departure from the one and only correct statement in his recent article: the profound aversion of pragmatic philosophy to absolutisms of any sort, whether of the reactionary Right or the reactionary Left. An account that started from that point might be led to consider the grounds on which this aversion is based. These grounds are as simple as they are sufficient. By its own nature, absolutism of any kind tends toward a dogmatic assurance that regards all questioning of its tenets as morally subversive, morally destructive, and hence to be suppressed. The course of history from Socrates and Galileo to the present day of Bolshevik Communism, shows that this outcome has been an actual consequence *in fact*, not merely an implication of absolutist theories. The intolerance which follows in theory and practice alike from the dogmatism accompanying absolutism in belief invites, indeed demands, the elimination of dissenters as morally and politically dangerous. Purges did not begin with Nazism or Bolshevism. They follow when absolutism becomes a dominant philosophy.

But even this persecution of dissenters by imprisonment and death is not its only seri-

* For the most recent effusion from the Soviet Union on American philosophy, particularly pragmatism, served up with *sauce Vishinskyeuse*, cf. “Contemporary Bourgeois Philosophy in the U.S.” by M. Dynnik, in the November 1947 issue of *Modern Review*, with a critical comment by Sidney Hook.

ous moral consequence. The less overt and less obvious suppression and perversion of inquiry may be an equally damaging result. The most effective means of smothering free inquiry proceeds from creation of an intellectual and moral atmosphere of matter-of-course conformity to ways of belief and behavior which are given the status of "eternal truths" through the backing by institutions whose prestige rests upon the supposed possession of these truths fortified by the weight of sheer historic success. It is absolutism, not pragmatism, which rationalizes the success of the status quo by identifying the real with the rational and existence with the real. It is still absolutism, and not pragmatism, which makes success in accomplishing a specially devised result its ultimate and all-sanctifying goal at the price of any means. It is not pragmatism but the system of M. Benda, insofar as it is absolutistic, which has something deeply in common with Bolshevik Communism.

IN THIS connection the words already quoted from William James are of deep significance. He does not speak of "eternal truths" but of "the eternal forces of truth which always work," although *immediately* without success, as rootlets of plants work because they are *alive*—not because of external authority. The worst thing morally that can be said about the claim to be already in possession of eternal and absolute truth is that it can choke the life which otherwise would everlastingly be active in discovery of those temporal, even quotidian, truths by which life itself develops, disclosing as it develops still more truths that are alive because they are not closed and finished—as every "truth" which claims absoluteness is bound to be.

As for the moral and intellectual responsibility of the account given by M. Benda of the pragmatism he attributes to James, I can hardly do better than cite a statement by the

authentic William James of what he regarded as the chief vice of American life: "That extraordinary idealization of 'success' in the mere outward sense of 'getting there' and getting there on as big a scale as we can, which characterizes our present generation." It is probable that one of his best known phrases is "that bitch-goddess success." This man who everywhere and all the time attacked what M. Benda presents as "pragmatic morality" is the man the latter "dares" to align with the Cecil Rhodes who (allegedly) said that something was just because it was useful to his nation! I should almost be grateful to M. Benda if I could believe that the very distortion of his account might serve to recall the attention of the present generation to all we still need to learn from the spirit that animates our legacy from William James.

What that spirit is can best be grasped not by isolated passages but from the whole of his writings, which reveal his profound love of variation, freshness, and spontaneity, his pluralistic conception of an open universe and man's creative role in it, his experimental theory of meaning and truth, his unwavering hospitality to new insights, and his imaginative fertility. To lump James with men who have called themselves "pragmatists," many of whom show no familiarity with his writings, who make absolutes of their doctrines, and who substitute the authority of uncritical tradition or violence for the authority of continuous scientific inquiry, is to be victimized by words. All the large words and abstractions of our time have been abused. After all, Hitler called himself a "socialist," Stalin calls himself a "democrat," clerical authoritarians call themselves "humanists," and Franco calls himself a "Christian."

To look behind the words to the substance of a man's vision is the sign of the free and sensitive intelligence.